



## NEWS RELEASE

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Contact: Russ Heimerich (916) 574-8170

### **Defend Yourself: If the License Doesn't Clear, Steer Clear of Service**

*Consumers Must Check the Licenses of the Professionals or Trades People They Hire*

For most people who suffered through the recent Southern California wildfires, getting back on their feet will require the services of a profession or trade licensed by the California Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA).

DCA Director Carrie Lopez urges consumers to make sure the people they employ – contractors, architects, surveyors, locksmiths, even the uniformed guard who may be watching over the site of their soon-to-be new home – are all properly licensed by DCA.

“Fire victims have suffered enough without also falling prey to unlicensed operators as they seek to put their lives back together,” said Lopez. “Unlicensed professionals rip off the consumer, the state and other law-abiding business people. As we have seen over and over, emergencies like the Southern California wildfires bring out the best in people – but they also can attract scam artists.”

Consumers are the first line of defense against scams. Well-informed, empowered consumers are less likely to become victims of fraud, even when facing a disaster as great as losing a home. To assist victims of California's October wildfires, the Department of Consumer Affairs (DCA) offers a wealth of resources. Some of this information – guides to various building- and construction-related services – is provided in this kit. Other materials can be found on the Department's Web site at [www.dca.ca.gov](http://www.dca.ca.gov), including how to file a complaint against a licensee. In the event a particular

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consumer complaint doesn't fall within DCA's jurisdiction, it doesn't mean the consumer has no recourse. He or she may be able to recover through Small Claims Court. This kit includes DCA's Guide to Small Claims Court to help consumers file a suit and collect a judgment.

But perhaps most important step to avoid scam artists or incompetent professionals in the first place is to check his or her license. Here DCA's Web site can help as well. It features a search engine that consumers can use to verify a license. Just click on the profession or trade name, enter the individual or business' name or license number, and view the results. Some of DCA's constituent agencies will include a licensee's disciplinary history, others do not. For those that don't, that information can be obtained by contacting the Department Consumer Information Center at (800) 952-5210, which also functions as the State of California's Fraud Hotline.

But if the individual or business doesn't clear the Department's verification system, consumers should steer clear of those services.

Many of DCA's 40 Boards, Bureaus and programs have been active in the wake of last month's wildfires, notably the Contractors State Licensing Board (CSLB), which has begun placing signs throughout the fire zones that alert fire victims that unlicensed or unscrupulous contractors may try to scam them and unlicensed contractors that it is a felony to contract without a license in a disaster area. CSLB has also already conducted several enforcement sweeps in those areas and is planning other actions to protect consumers. For more information on CSLB's efforts, visit <http://www.cslb.ca.gov/General-Information/disaster-information-center/disaster-information-overview.asp>.

Other professionals licensed by DCA Boards and Bureaus can help fire victims get back on their feet, as well.

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Many of the professions regulated by DCA may have an impact on rebuilding. Those include:

- **The Landscape Architects Technical Committee** – Landscape Architects can help consumers plan for the next fire by maximizing their landscaping fire-prevention qualities.
- **Architects Board** -- Only licensees of this Board may provide architectural services in California.
- **Bureau of Security and Investigative Services** – If you are using a private security service to protect your property during the rebuilding process, make sure both the business and the guards are licensed by the Bureau.

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